

CHAPTER 1

Challenges in Clinical Work with Adolescents

AN OVERVIEW

What Is Adolescence?

Youth are on a voyage of self-discovery. They are beginning to understand who they are and who they are not. This is a process that takes many years to complete and may be arduous, at times. During this period of self-discovery, they consider who they want to become—first ideally, and then later more realistically.

The term *adolescence* is not universally defined. In some cultures, adolescence is the period when the child obtains the necessary education or ceremonial rituals to be prepared for the adult world. Therefore, in some cultures this period of adolescence is relatively short. However, in mainstream American culture adolescence lasts longer, spanning 10 or more years. Youth-oriented practitioners usually consider it to span 12–21 years of age. Some youth workers, due to their involvement in the legal system, consider adolescence as ending at 18. However, others suggest that adolescence ends only when the youth is fully independent and has completed his or her education or started on a career, which could occur as early as 18 years or not until the early to mid-20s. We define adolescence as including young people whose ages range from about 13 years old to about 20 years old.

Most credit G. Stanley Hall (1904) with coining the term *adolescence*. He called this a period of “stress and storm.” Later theorists proposed that adolescence is not necessarily a tumultuous stage of development. The “rebel without a cause” perception of youth is a myth that has been perpetuated in movies and literature, but not in fact (Bandura, 1964). Certainly,

new issues confront youth as they leave childhood, but contemporary theorists believe adolescence should not be a uniquely stressful time. Jessor, Turbin, and Costa (1998) found that youth who had high aspirations and positive self-esteem when they entered high school were likely to be well adjusted upon leaving high school. Frequently, our adolescent clients have had inadequate support and resources, and few caring adults in their lives. For these clients the passage through to adulthood can be risky and difficult.

Adolescence is a time of amazing growth and vitality. Adolescents can think in new and exciting ways, they are usually in the peak of health, and they are often involved with a wide network of people—from the family, neighborhood, and school to after-school activities, work, and religious affiliations. It can be an exciting, satisfying, and happy time. However, for some youth, adolescence can be a period of profound loneliness, depression, and ostracism. These youth may feel they do not fit in with their peers; others may feel the experiences they have had keep them from meaningful relationships. They may feel no one could really understand them or the events they have endured. They fear rejection if they reveal their “true selves.” For the casual observer, these youth may scoff at and deride others who hold more conventional views. But frequently this voiced disdain covers feelings of inadequacy, vulnerability, and pain.

Adolescence in Context

Young people grow up in particular contexts including the family, school, and neighborhood. In turn, the media influences each of these contexts. This book offers clinical strategies to assess teens and create interventions that are appropriate in these different contexts. Additionally, the book focuses on both positive influences (*protective factors*) and negative influences (*risk factors*) in each of the environments or contexts in which the youth develops. We promote a holistic assessment of the youth, one that enables you to become familiar with him or her in multiple contexts, and the strengths and challenges he or she experiences in each context. From that perspective, we discuss how to support growth in each context, as well as appropriate interventions to employ.

A Multisystemic–Ecological Approach

The multisystemic–ecological approach to practice with teens accounts for the numerous contexts described above in combination with the psychological and social factors that affect youth. Throughout the book we use the

term *M-E approach* as shorthand for the multisystemic–ecological approach. Ecological theory is the foundation for the M-E approach, which requires practitioners to consider not only clients’ psychological experiences, but also the sociopolitical influences that create context and meaning.

Consider an adolescent who is acting out—say, vandalizing his or her school. The M-E approach leads practitioners to assess not only psychological reasons for the acting out (such as a behavioral disorder), but also broader systems as influences on the youth’s behavior (such as experiences of racism, bullying, or homophobia). Acknowledging and understanding the impact of these broader systems does not mean condoning the acting-out behavior. But it does lead to a more thorough evaluation of the presenting problem, which then has a greater chance of guiding interventions that will be effective.

Consider the following case example, which was developed and embellished from a news story (St. John, 2007). Shahir is a 14-year-old refugee from Afghanistan who has been living in Clarkson, Georgia, for the past 4 years. He lives with his 16-year-old sister, his grandparents, and his father. His mother died during the war in Afghanistan. Shortly after her death, the family feared further persecution and escaped their home for a refugee camp in northern India, where they lived for 1 year. Later, the family immigrated to the United States. Shahir is now a member of a local soccer team in Clarkson that consists of players from all over the world who also came to the town as refugees. Clarkson has become a major U.S. refugee resettlement center. Given this common history of refugee status, and having a tongue-in-cheek sense of humor, the team chose to name itself the “Fugees.” The team practices and plays their games in the park that is centrally located in downtown Clarkson. The team looks forward to possibly becoming regional champions in the next season.

Shahir’s family life is loving and supportive. He loves and admires his grandfather who was a champion soccer player when he was a young man in Afghanistan. His family interacts with some of the other families of the boys on the soccer team. Shahir is in the ninth grade at the local high school, where his teammates are also students. While his grades continue to be above average and his social skills on par with other ninth-grade boys, the school social worker meets with him because of recent behaviors: refusing to answer questions in class, the disappearance of his usually sunny disposition and smiles, and a fight with a boy he barely knows. Recently, the mayor of Clarkson declared, “There will be nothing but football and baseball down there [the park] so long as I am mayor,” adding, “Those fields weren’t made for soccer.” Many of the long-time town residents of Clarkson support this declaration. As a result, the Fugees team has not been able to practice for 3 weeks, and one of the most important games of the season takes place next week.

A traditional approach to the assessment of Shahir tends toward exploration of the psychological factors that might be influencing Shahir's current behavioral challenges. These could include behavioral reactions to depressive or anxious thoughts:

- If the anniversary of his mother's death is not far off.
- If Shahir is worried about disappointing his father or grandfather as he becomes more Americanized.
- If Shahir is anxious because of disagreements that arise with teammates now that they are no longer allowed to hold practice sessions.

In contrast, the M-E approach expands assessment to include Shahir's behavior in different contexts and the sociopolitical factors that may be influencing his behavioral changes. As such, the ecological practitioner would explore ramifications of the local mayor's decree that no soccer team can use the field in the local park. The practitioner will consider how Shahir, his peers, and his family view the mayor's decree, and assist in considering whether there are any connections to the frustration over not being able to practice and Shahir's current behavior. The practitioner will also consider the mayor's decree in the context of post-9/11 attitudes, which have left some Americans fearing and having bias against (even discriminating against) persons from the Middle East and South Asia. Additionally, the practitioner needs to consider how the community welcomed Shahir's family and other refugee families to Clarkson. In this light, some of the questions the M-E practitioner will pose include:

- "Are school and community members targeting the Fugees with racial and religious bias in the aftermath of the mayor's decree?"
- "Are there any youth from Afghanistan or other refugee youth who play on the local baseball and football teams?"
- "Are longtime Clarkson residents interacting positively with immigrants from Afghanistan and other countries?"

This expanded assessment has the potential to open up multiple options for intervention aimed at changing the psychological *and* sociopolitical influences on Shahir's current behaviors. For example, the practitioner may collaborate with the Fugee teammates and their families to contact their neighborhood councilperson and to speak at a City Council meeting. The practitioner might also intervene at the school level if peers are taunting the Fugee teammates with racial and religious slurs. Shahir's experience illustrates the complexity and multiple contexts that may influ-

ence clients' behaviors and feelings. It is our hope that the M-E approach to understanding teen clients will increase your ability to build cross-system relationships that lead to positive outcomes for youth.

How Ecological Theory Illuminates Adolescent Development

Human ecology is the science of interrelationships between living organisms and between organisms and their natural, built, and social environments (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Hayword, 1994). Ecological theory proposes that the characteristics of the individual interacting with characteristics of the environment over time influences development (Barrows, 1995; Bubolz & Sontag, 1993; Griffiore & Phenice, 2001). Bronfenbrenner (1979), the originator of the term *human ecology*, speaks of the developing person "as a growing dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures the milieu in which it resides" (p. 21). The environment transforms and accommodates the individual and the individual transforms and accommodates the environment. Neither the environment nor the individual is the same due to the interaction. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1989). A human ecological perspective allows the practitioner to assess and intervene at the multilevel interactions between a teen and his or her environments.

Time is an important ingredient in ecological theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) uses the term *chronosystem* to denote generational influences affecting the individual, critical events, and everyday stresses that contribute to human development. *Generational influences* become more apparent during adolescence and young adulthood. The environmental factors of an era have an impact on that generation for the rest of their lifespan. In the United States such generational influences include the Great Depression, World War II, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, the Women's Movement, the fall of the Berlin Wall, September 11, and the War on Terrorism. These events change the nature of society and have an impact on the developing teen. For example, ideas about who is safe and how to secure safety in post-9/11 America may be the reason why Shahir's team cannot practice soccer in the park.

Critical events are particular life events that influence an individual, though not necessarily his or her contemporaries. They include events such as death or incarceration of a parent, serious illness, moving to a better neighborhood, the birth of a sibling, or graduating from high school. Such events have an enormous impact on the development of the individual, but not on the wider society in which that person is developing. Practitioners who ask teen clients to make timelines of their lives can assess for the effects of critical events. As a youth plots his or life events, ask what

each event meant to him or her and what he or she learned from the event. As the intervention continues, ask how the critical events he or she experienced shaped him or her to be the person he or she is today.

Everyday stresses refer to the daily issues individuals face such as financial insecurity, traffic, time pressure, sleeping patterns, family coping methods, relationship struggles, friendship quarrels, and dietary issues. The ability to cope with these frequent and sometimes chronic issues helps to mold the individual. Asking the youth “What hassles do you have to deal with every day?” can begin to give some insight into his or her everyday stresses.

The chronosystem has a profound effect on the development of the adolescent. It also helps to form his or her identity through the connection to his or her generation, personal experiences, and life stresses. The chronosystem helps define his or her worldview and the understanding of his or her place in that world.

The Microsystem

The individual develops in a number of different contexts. The initial structure where development occurs is the microsystem. It involves the reciprocal interplay among people, objects, and symbols. The microsystem has been defined “as a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical and material features and containing other persons with distinctive characteristics of temperament, personality, and systems of belief” (Bronfenbrenner, 1989, p. 227). The initial microsystem that the infant inhabits is the home, where the majority of interaction is between the infant and the parent, or primary caregiver. As the child grows and enters other microsystems he or she has interactions with different people and objects. Examples of these other microsystems include day care, church, synagogue, mosque, school, the neighborhood, and the peer network. In adolescence, youth participate in a multitude of microsystems. We address youth development and resilience in the family, school and neighborhood microsystems.

Development is bidirectional; that is, the family and school influence development and the teen, in turn, influences the family and school. As the teen moves from one setting to another, relationships may change. One microsystem, such as neighborhood, may be a venue where he or she flourishes and another, such as the school, may be a location where he or she feels stifled, lost, or stigmatized. Understanding youth in the clinical context requires information about activities, roles, and relationships in each microsystem. This knowledge provides insight into social and emotional functioning.

The Mesosystem

The mesosystem is the interface between two microsystems. The mesosystem refers to the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing adolescent actively participates. An example of a mesosystemic interface is the relationship between home and school. The connections between these settings provide continuity for the developing person and insight for all members of the microsystems to understand the adolescent and how he or she develops in the other context. For example, positive functioning increases when there is interaction between the multiple settings where the youth resides (Bunting, 1996; Deslandes, Royer, & Turcotte, 1997; Fuller & Olsen, 1998; Pipher, 1994). The positive interface of these spheres is a source of support for the adolescent. Fuller and Olsen discuss the importance of the home–school interface at the middle school and high school levels. They state that students whose parents are involved in their schools have higher aspirations and commitments to lifelong education. These students are more likely to avoid high-risk behaviors, are more involved in school or community activities, and are more likely to avoid school problems (Rolande, Royer, & Turcotte, 1997). The adolescent needs the interaction between these two important spheres of his or her life to achieve a greater degree of adjustment.

If the important people in the adolescent's life know each other, he or she feels more secure and more supported. For instance, if the parent and the teacher come together to discuss the student's academic progress with the student present, the student is aware not only that these important players in his or her life care about and are interested in him or her, but also that these individuals hold him or her accountable. This is especially important if the student has tried in the past to triangulate parent and teacher, so that they were at odds with each other, instead of working together as a team. The adolescent now understands that there will be the possibility for ongoing discussion, information sharing, and dialogue between these members of the two microsystems.

Another mesosystemic interface that is important for the adolescent is the family and peer microsystem interaction. Pipher (1994), stresses the importance of the adolescent to invite friends into the home so that members of each microsystem know each other and the roles that each has in the developing person's life. Adolescents are happier when friends are comfortable with the family and the family is at ease with his or her friends. Understanding and support promote communication between a teen's microsystems and avoid possible distrust, animosity, or disregard for members from separate microsystems. Greater knowledge and trust across each microsystem enhances adolescent functioning. For example, the ado-

lescent's adjustment improves by strengthening both the family-school interaction and the family-peer interaction.

Practitioners conduct enhanced assessments and interventions when they assess the varied activities, roles, and relationships a teen has in one microsystem and how these activities, roles, and relationships support or undermine his or her development in another microsystem. For example, how the adolescent makes and retains friends in the neighborhood microsystem may be quite different from how he or she makes and retains friends in the school microsystem. Helping the youth understand the similarities and differences in how he or she "operates" in each microsystem will improve his or her social functioning. Additionally, modifying the environment can help the individual be successful in a different or new microsystem.

The Exosystem

The exosystem does not involve the developing person as a participant. The adolescent does not influence events in the exosystem, but nonetheless the events affect his or her development. Some examples of the exosystem are mom's or dad's work, mom's or dad's school or extrafamilial activities, the local board of education, the state and federal legislature, Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS), and Medicaid. For example, decisions to lay off employees at a parent's workplace can have profound effects on family finances and in turn a teen's options for present and future choices. Additionally, parent stress due to job loss can filter down to the teen resulting in strained parent-child relations.

The Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the cultural environment that permeates the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem. It is the cultural setting that includes social expectations for individual and group behavior. Macrosystems include tenets of behavior; rules (both spoken and unspoken); morals of a particular time, place, generation, and environment; and attitudes toward diversity and civil rights. Macrosystem expectations can be universal or pertain to a particular subset of any population. A society's biases and prejudices undergird these expectations. As a result, some values and behaviors are the "norm" while others are aberrant. For example, traditional gender role norms suggest that men ought to be the major breadwinners in a family. Hence, men who elect to be a stay-at-home parent are an oddity and even shunned in certain circles as "playing mom."

The adolescent perspective on expectations of the macrosystem is often in flux. He or she may subscribe to rules, morals, and tenets of behav-

ior that differ somewhat or drastically from parent and society expectations. Youth ostracize peers who exhibit behaviors and attitudes that differ from macrosystem norms. Youth may feel a great deal of tension between the expectations and norms of behavior in the family as compared to the neighborhood or school. For example, when recent immigrant youth attend school in a new country they often feel tension because teachers are not able to fully appreciate their home cultures and languages. Practitioners who understand the effects of macrosystems and the pressure youth experience from these effects will have a greater appreciation about the adolescent's sense of identity, purpose, and values.

Case Study: Applying Ecological Theory and the M-E Approach

Ecological theory and the M-E approach highlight the multiple systems that influence an individual's relationships and the myriad opportunities for assessment and intervention beyond a teen's psychological status. The following case example challenges you to apply the ideas and concepts presented in this chapter.

Ramona is a 16-year-old African American. She resides in Chicago with her two brothers, Carlos, 18, and Juan, 14, and her mother Alfreda, 46. The children's father and Alfreda's husband, George, 49, resides in Detroit, Michigan. Alfreda and George grew up in Detroit where they each have extensive family networks. When the children were young, George's mother provided child care so that George could work and Alfreda could attend university. George worked at a major automotive plant and the family finances suffered because of the boom and bust nature of that industry. On the completion of her degree, Alfreda believed that a move to Chicago would create a more stable future for the family since the auto industry had cycled through bad times in the past. However, George believed that they would stay in Detroit forever and that the depressed economy would turn around so that Alfreda could find a local teaching job. However, schools were closing, teachers lost jobs, and teaching opportunities in Detroit seemed remote.

When George was out of work for 12 months, Alfreda suggested that the family move to Chicago where there were more teaching jobs and possibilities for his employment. However, George did not want to give up hope on the work he had done for most of his adult life. Also, his parents were aging now and he wanted to be available to them. This difference of opinion caused conflict between the couple. However, when Alfreda obtained a teaching job in Chicago and the auto industry took further hits, George finally agreed that he would move. The couple agreed that George would

stay in Detroit until they sold their home. Alfreda and the children moved to Chicago, but 12 months later they still had not sold their home and George's parents' health declined rapidly. It has now been 4 years since the original move and the couple is despondent about ever having the family live in the same city. George's parents need his help and their home still has not sold. In contrast, Alfreda adores her work with the students and has many friends at school where she teaches.

Ramona was 12 when she left Detroit. She has a circle of friends in Chicago at her high school. She sings in the choir at her church, and has a small part in the musical at her school. Ramona passes by her mom's elementary school on her way home. Frequently she walks home with her mom. Ramona misses her grandmother in Detroit and all of her cousins. Her dad used to come to visit at least twice a month, but recently his visits decreased to once a month because of caring for his parents.

Carlos's transition to life in Chicago has not been good. He had trouble in school when he first arrived, and was evaluated and placed in special education. Some of the other students in his classes do not value their education and would prefer to "run the streets." He has begun to question why he should stay in school since he is doing so poorly. He has frequent verbal fights with Ramona and has stolen money from both Ramona and his mom. Some of Carlos's friends have asked out Ramona, but she has not been interested. Carlos's friends are a little rough. On two occasions, one guy who is in school with Carlos followed Ramona home. This made her nervous, and now she always stops by her mom's school on her way home.

Juan is doing well in school, but his mother worries because he parrots some of Carlos's ideas. Juan is athletic and plays pick-up basketball on the playground of his mother's school. This is his last year in middle school. Next year he will be in high school.

QUESTIONS FOR THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

1. What microsystems does each adolescent in the family inhabit?
2. Describe each of the teen's roles, activities, and relationships in each microsystem.
3. How do Ramona's, Carlos's, and Juan's activities, roles, and relationships support or undermine development in their other microsystems?
4. What mesosystemic interfaces affect Ramona, Carlos, and Juan?
5. What exosystems influence their lives?
6. What macrosystemic influences are in Ramona's, Carlos's, and Juan's lives?
7. What generational issues are influencing Ramona's, Carlos's, and Juan's lives?

8. How are the generational influences of the parents different than the adolescents?
9. What critical events have been important in Ramona's, Carlos's, and Juan's lives?
10. What everyday stresses does each adolescent experience?
11. What do you miss about each adolescent if an ecological perspective is not used?

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